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Human-forest relationships - redefining the role of forests in modern society for a sustainable culture

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The relationship between forests and people goes back to the early development of civilisation. However, parallel with technical innovations and an increasing urbanisation of the society, an alienation from nature has taken place.

Alternative materials or resources have replaced the use of forest products, and the role of forests in the daily life of people has changed. However, during the last decades, the interest in forests as a renewable resource has increased again. Re-defining our relationship to forests may therefore be able to help us develop a sustainable culture.

Although society has become more conscious about the various values that forests have for mankind, most interests are dealing with the social, economic and ecological functions of forests. What is missing in the discussion of our relationship to forests is a comparable interest in cultural functions. While many of the social, economic and ecological issues are quite new, often rooted in problems and challenges of modern society, cultural and spiritual values are characterized by their long history and the bonds which they have formed between forests and people. Acknowledging these ancient values may help strengthen the awareness of people of their dependency on forests. The aim should be to build up a sustainable relationship between forests and the needs of the modern society, including productive, spiritual, emotional and aesthetical aspects.

In this paper, we will look at the bonds between forests and people that have developed through history. By knowing our cultural roots and the role that forests have played in the development of our civilisation, we can learn to value their importance in modern society. This may help us achieve a holistic, sustainable management of our forest resources.